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AUTHOR Levant, Ronald F.; Rabinovitz, Joseph
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ABSTRACT

The content and organization of an 8-week evening course for fathers, developed at Boston University, are discussed in this workshop report. Participants' characteristics that should be considered by the group leader are also discussed. The first half of the course focused on learning to listen and respond to one's child, whereas the second half concerned speaking for oneself and acceptance of the child. The format for each training session involved (1) presenting a communication skill by using a brief lecture, videotapes, and live examples; (2) practicing the skill in role-playing exercises; and (3) transferring the skill to interaction with one's child through homework assignments. Evaluation of the program showed that the course improved fathers' communication skills and changed their views of the ideal family. In addition, their children perceived changes in their relationships with their fathers. In directing the group, course leaders should consider such factors as fathers' motivation for enrolling in the course, previous experience in classrooms and role-playing situations, knowledge of child development theory, and home and family situations. Additional factors include the amount of support fathers receive from significant adults and the low energy level many may experience from coming to the class directly from work. (CB)

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Parent Education for Fathers

A Workshop Presented at

The Greater Boston Fatherhood Forum

June 16, 1984

Ronald F. Levant, Ed.D.
Joseph Rabinovitz, Ed.M.

Boston University

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Until recently, men's active participation in parenting has been viewed as of minimal importance, and even as inappropriate (Nash, 1965; Josselyn, 1956). However, the importance of the father's role in child development has gained increasing recognition during the 1970's, in what Lamb (1979) has called an "era of paternal rediscovery". Moreover, increasing men's participation in family work (which includes parenting and housework - Pleck, Note 4) is a key issue for contemporary families and for society as a whole as women increase their participation in the paid labor force (Masnick & Bane, 1980).

Increasing men's participation in family work - specifically in parenting - may be facilitated by an educational intervention. Traditionally, men have not been prepared for an extensive role in parenting, either through family socialization or formal education (Hill & Aldous, 1969). This lack of preparation poses a difficult and even insurmountable obstacle for many men. The difficulties which men experience in developing an active parenting role have been highlighted in recent popular and professional examinations of fathering after marital separation (Kramer vs. Kramer, Jaffrey-1979; Keshet & Finkelstein, 1978). When there are no crises forcing men to develop an active parenting role, many men may choose to stick to the traditional pattern, as Eversoll (1979) has found, despite the fact that such a stance conflicts with contemporary social realities (Hoffman, 1977) or with one's idealized self-image (Anderson, 1977). Price-Bonham and Skeen (1979) have suggested that "fathers may be spending great amounts of time in their work role in order to avoid responsibilities of the father role because they lack the knowledge/skills to be comfortable in the role." A similar view has been put forth by Sawin and Parke (1979).

Parent education for fathers has been a badly neglected area. First of all, the vast majority of popular parenting manuals explicitly or implicitly endorse the traditional roles of father as dominant breadwinner and mother as nurturant

caregiver (DeFrain, 1977). Second, parent education courses have, until very recently, almost completely ignored fathers. A search of the available reviews of the literature on parent training (Berkowitz & Graziano, 1972; Bernal & North, 1978; Croake & Glover, 1977; Johnson & Katz, 1973; O'Dell, 1974; Reisinger, Ora & Frangia, 1976; Tavormina, 1974) found not one study which focused on the training of fathers, or which even indicated whether the "parent" group included fathers (Loiselle, Note 3).

Parent education is a complex field with a long history. Focussing on programs which educate parents in groups, the various approaches can be classified according to their pedagogical method and theoretical orientation. With regard to method, there are programs which emphasize group discussion and didactic teaching methods (Auerback, 1968; Dreikurs & Soltz, 1964), and those which emphasize the systematic development of skills through a combination of didactic and experiential processes, including homework exercises (Gordon, 1976; Dinkmeyer & McKay, 1976; Patterson, 1971). With regard to theoretical orientation, programs have been developed from client-centered or Rogerian (Gordon, 1976), Adlerian (Dreikurs & Soltz, 1964; Dinkmeyer & McKay, 1976), behavioral (Patterson, 1971) and other orientations.

At Boston University's School of Education we have been involved in the development of parent education programs since 1976.

Our programs, which we call "personal developmental", are systematic skills training programs with a client-centered orientation. They emphasize the development of communication skills such as empathic listening, genuine responding, and acceptance. Over the past eight years we have developed programs for foster parents, working-class parents, single parents, step-parents, dual-earner/co-parents, in addition to the program for fathers which is the focus of today's workshop. Three of these have been evaluated and the others are scheduled for evaluation.

The courses meet for eight weeks, for 3 hours in the evening. Each course is tailored to the needs of the particular group of parents involved. Here are a few examples:

Co-parenting. This is a course for two-career co-parent couples who are trying to balance work, marriage, and child care. The course begins with a focus on communication skills, and emphasizes the development of an effective parental team.

Step-parenting. This course is designed for step-parents and (preferably) their spouses. It emphasizes the development of skills to negotiate the complexities of living in a "reconstituted family". Participants are taught the basic communication skills, and work to establish an effective forum for family communication.

Single-Parent Education. This course is designed for single parents, both women and men. The course emphasizes communication and child management skills, and helps parents develop a personal network of supports and resources.

The parent education course for fathers is designed for both married and single fathers who wish to improve their relationship(s) with the child(ren). The course emphasizes communication skills, particularly learning to listen and respond to your child's feelings, and to express one's own feelings in a facilitative manner.

The first half of the course focusses on listening and responding to one's child, whereas the second half concerns speaking for oneself and acceptance. The format for the course is detailed in the Leaders' Guide (Levant & Doyle, Note 1). Each half of the course includes three sessions devoted to the development of specific skills followed by a fourth session devoted to synthesis and integration. The last session includes a graduation ceremony.

The listening and responding half of the course begins with a session concerning nonverbal parental behaviors which can facilitate communication, moves in the next session to listening and responding reflectively to the content of the child's message, and finishes with a session on listening and responding empathically to the child's feelings.

In the second half of the course, the speaking for oneself segment begins with a session on increasing the fathers' awareness of their thoughts and feelings

which emerge while interacting with their children, and concludes with a session on fathers learning to express their thoughts and feelings in a non-defensive open manner. In the segment on acceptance, the fathers examine their personal sensitivities in order to become more accepting of their children.

The program includes didactic and experiential components. The format for the skill training sessions is as follows: Introduction and definition of the skill in a brief lecture; demonstration of the skill using videotaped and live examples, usually role plays between the two instructors; practice of the skill in role play exercises, using videotape for immediate feed-back; and, consolidating and transferring the skill to the interaction with one's child through homework assignments. The homework assignments are contained in the Father's Workbook (Levant & Doyle, Note 2). Fathers are expected to spend one hour per week on homework, which includes readings, paper-and-pencil exercises, and experiential practice with one's child. The paper-and-pencil exercises progress from asking the fathers to discriminate good vs. poor responses to asking them to formulate their own good responses. Homework assignments are discussed in class each week.

The fathers who participate in the course come from all walks of life, from laborer to plumber to lawyer to stockbroker. Ages have ranged from the late 20's to the mid 50's, with children from early infancy to young adulthood. About half the Dads are married and half divorced. A few of the married fathers have remarried and are working out a "reconstituted" family. Those that are divorced have custody arrangements ranging from visitation to joint custody. In this regard, one father with two teenage daughters stands out in my memory.

Though the men are successful in the workplace and fulfill the "good provider" role, they experience dissatisfaction with their relationships with their children. Some speak with sadness of the distance in their relationships with their own fathers, or articulate a desire to not make some of the mistakes with their children that their fathers made with them. Others feel inadequate with their children, and

marvel at how well their wives "do it". Some are very uncomfortable with feelings, both their own and their children's. Others get caught in the "anger trap", and become ensnared in unproductive repetitive patterns of testing and punishment. Most assume they know how to communicate, until the first videotaped role play, in which a father might tower over his child, or talk from behind a newspaper. About halfway through the course, after fathers have had some success at mastering the skills, several report that they are finding the skill useful not only with their children, but with their wives, and others at the workplace, as well.

For example, one father said:

I found the lessons in practicing communication particularly valuable. I would add the concept - the one most people miss - that communication is generally undervalued and completely misunderstood in our society. I think that people must feel as though they are doing fine, when in fact they are not dealing with the emotional level at all, in many many cases.

And another observed:

Like I said in the beginning, not only family members, but I'm using the listening skills in my job. I'm taking those same skills that we developed, and applying them, so that if I'm talking to an employee, and the employee is having a problem, I try to develop some trust with that person, establish eye contact, and respond to his statement by saying the statement back to let him know that I'm listening.

The parent education program for fathers is one of the three programs that have been evaluated (Levant & Doyle, 1983). The program was found to result in an improvement in father's communication skills - specifically, a significant increase in their overall sensitivity, a significant reduction in their use of undesirable responses, a trend toward their increased use of desirable responses, and a trend toward their increased acceptance of their child's expression of feelings. Significantly more experimental than control group children perceived position changes in their relationships with their fathers. An assessment of the family concepts of mothers and fathers indicated that fathers changed their views

of the ideal family.

Some feel for these results can perhaps be garnered from considering the responses of one boy to a test which asked him to draw a picture of his family doing something together. Before the course began the child drew a picture of a roller coaster, with the tracks filling 90% of the page. At the very top was a tiny little car. In the front seat was the boy, legs and arms akimbo. In the next seat was Mom and then Dad. His brother was in the last seat, and appeared to be falling out of the car. After the course was over, the boy drew a picture of a spaceship running diagonally across the page in which the cockpit filled about 40% of the page. Seated at the controls was Dad; next to him, Mom. At opposite sides, looking out the window, were he and his brother. To my eye this sequence of pictures represented a remarkable transformation of family structure and emotional climate.

Leaders of parent education courses for fathers must be aware of many issues that can affect the outcome of the course. For starters there are familiar issues such as helping group members to develop trust in each other, facilitating conversation, keeping the group safe for members, and conveying the course content in a manner that can be digested by the members. The following section outlines additional factors that the leader working specifically with fathers must be aware of.

The first factor is the motivation for the father enrolling in the course. It is not enough to assume that the dad is simply there to learn the communication skills offered in the course description. The leader must consider what is the source of the father's motivation. For example many of the fathers who enroll in the course do so because they are experiencing moderate to severe difficulties with their children. Some of the fathers who have been experiencing stress begin the course hoping to find some sort of "correct" method of dealing with their children. The leader must be able to recognize this desire, legitimize the feeling behind it, and he must be able to convey to the father that there is no "correct" method, without dampening the father's enthusiasm. This is analogous to the family that presents itself for family therapy with the parents hoping the therapist will be able to "fix" the problem child. Some of the fathers in the course take time to learn the distinction between learning a

technique they can use to make their child behave differently, and learning a set of skills that they can use to add to their interactions with their child. The latter is the idea the leaders try to engender in the group members.

A second factor leaders must take into account is the amount of experience the group members have had in similar situations. Because men have typically not been involved in parent education courses, it is not surprising to find that the majority of any given group will have had little experience in this type of group learning situation. Thus members may be reluctant to participate because they are not sure of the rules by which the group operates. It is helpful for the leaders to present their agenda for the session at the start of the class in order to put members at ease. It is also recommended to structure some kind of warm up exercise for the first session to help reduce anxiety. One technique that has proved helpful involves pairing the fathers up, giving them ten to fifteen minutes to talk together about such things as the reasons why they are taking the course, their home situation, their children, and then have the group reform and have one father introduce his "partner" to the group.

A related issue is how long it has been since the father participated in some kind of classroom learning situation. Some fathers will not have been in a classroom since they were in high school or college. They may feel somewhat

inhibited or nervous about being in a class situation, and this nervousness may be compounded by the fact that much of the learning centers around group discussion and role plays. The leader can get an idea of both the members' experience in groups and how long it has been since they were in a classroom situation by simply asking the question during his introduction to the course. Care must be taken to insure that a member is not put on the spot. In some groups where there is an obvious large range of formal education, the leader may choose not to ask the question and rely on his intuition to judge if any members are uncomfortable.

One strength of this course is that it is designed in such a way that it does not require group members to be versed in theories of child development. The theoretical aspects are presented in a straight forward manner with each succeeding week building on the material from the previous session. Leaders have found that sometimes members come with a wide range of knowledge of child developmental theory. This can affect the group process in a positive or negative manner depending on the particular style of the "advanced" group member and the leader's ability to integrate the more advanced material offered by this member in a way that enhances the group process. The leader must take care not to engage this member in "high level" discussions to the exclusion of other group members.

During the first session it is helpful for the leader to get a sense of the home and family situations of the fathers

in the group. A typical group will consist of fathers who are married, divorced, and separated. Some fathers have also reported that they never married the mother of their child, and these dads may or may not have contact with the child. The leader must be able to blend the concerns brought up by different members so that all will profit from ensuing discussions. One common issue is the fact that some of the fathers are single parents while others have a partner who they may or may not be married to. It is important for the leader to help the fathers on one side of the coin understand what the issues are for the person on the other side and vice versa.

The leader must be aware that the home situation may affect the father's ability to practice the skills with his child and do the assigned homework. Some fathers may report they have difficulty because of occupations and other circumstances to practice the skills. These fathers should be encouraged to find the time, and they can be reminded that similarly to any other skill they have learned, these communication skills must be practiced. A father who has limited or no contact with his child can be encouraged to practice the communication skills with colleagues at work, or other adults he comes in contact with.

The amount of support the fathers receive from significant adults in their lives may affect the process. A number of married fathers report experiencing significant amounts of

support and encouragement from their wives which they say helps them stay motivated. Other unmarried fathers have reported feeling supported from significant adults in their lives. A few fathers report skeptical reactions from friends and family members concerning their participation in the course. One father said he got very angry at his friend and told the friend that he is taking the course so that he does not end up raising his child like his friend raised his.

One very helpful factor is that the members of the group tend to become very supportive of each other. Comments like, "I like how you handled that", and, "I don't blame you for getting angry", are commonly heard throughout the sessions. The leader is also in position to offer support and encouragement.

A last point that the leader must always keep in mind is that many of the fathers are going to come to the class directly from work, so that energy level is an important factor. Allowing for differences in personal style, it is important for the leader to be energized and enthusiastic. Many fathers report that they often came to the class extremely tired, but found the class an upbeat, highly energized experience.

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